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STATE FOR NEA/I - JDAVIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: AHMADINEJAD VISIT MOSTLY PR; STRONG SIGNAL THAT
IRAQ'S ARAB NEIGHBORS MUST ESTABLISH MISSIONS

REF: BAGHDAD 621

Classified By: PolCouns Matt Tueller for Reasons 1.4d/b

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's overnight visit largely confirmed its advance billing as a PR exercise. The substance, centered around the signing of seven MOUs, including a USD 1 billion loan package, will require time to evaluate. The trip did send a strong visual that should remind Iraq's Arab neighbors of their own interests in Iraq and spur them, at the very least, to end their diplomatic inertia and establish Embassies and assign Ambassadors to Baghdad. Despite initial plans for key visits outside of Baghdad, Ahmadinejad did not visit Kurdistan for a meeting with KRG President Barzani, and most notably, did not visit Karbala and Najaf for meetings with the religious leadership. Septel will report the Foreign Minister's comments on the visit. END SUMMARY.

INITIAL BUZZ--VISIT IS PUBLIC RELATIONS EXERCISE--SOME THINK MORTARS DID THE ADVANCE WORK

¶2. (C) Both Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari in meetings with Embassy staff, and Deputy Prime Minister Barham Saleh, in a meeting with Codel Costa, said the visit was primarily a public relations exercise that would be long on platitudes and light on substance. (Note. Before the visit, Post circulated a schedule to the Department via e-mail. End Note.) What substance there was revolved around the signing of seven Memoranda of Understanding on issues such as industrial infrastructure development, transportation and customs sector cooperation, and a USD 1 billion loan. The symbolic aspect did not leave many Iraqis indifferent; the visit triggered demonstrations in Baghdad, Kirkuk and Anbar, where protesters in the latter marched carrying the old Iraqi flag--with its overtones of the 1980-1988 Iran/Iraq war. One Sunni wag in Baghdad brandished a sign reading "Welcome Ahmadinejad, your mortars preceded you."

SUNNI REACTION--HASHIMI DECLINES ONE-ON-ONE MEETING;
MASHADANI HOPES VISIT TRIGGERS MORE ARAB ENGAGEMENT

¶3. (C) Vice President Hashimi was the only senior GOI leader to decline a one-on-one meeting with the Iranian President. Hashimi did participate in Ahmadinejad's meeting with the Presidency Council where, according to press reports, he castigated Ahmadinejad over Iranian interference in Iraq. In a March 2 meeting with PolCounselor, Council of Representatives Speaker Mashadani complained that President Talabani did not consult other GOI senior leaders before inviting Ahmadinejad but took some consolation that the visit might spur greater engagement from Iraq's Sunni neighbors. (reftel) Iraqi National Dialogue Front leader Saleh Al Mutlaq, speaking on Al Jazirah, recognized that the two countries were inextricably bound, but stressed that Iraq

should have waited for tangible evidence of Iran's constructive intentions before inviting Ahmadinejad to visit.

LATE NIGHT AT THE ISCI COMPOUND

¶4. (C) Ahmadinejad met with Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, Chairman of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), at the later's sprawling compound the night of March 2. According to senior Hakim aide Haitham al-Husseini, the two and one-half hour event included a 30-minute meeting, a dinner, and a press conference. Haitham characterized the meeting as a set-piece event in which both parties took turns in making speech-like statements that were full of bromides about brotherly relations between fellow Muslim nations and peoples. Ahmadinejad reportedly expressed solidarity with the Iraqi government and the Iraqi people; noted the changes that Iraq has experienced in the last few years; and remarked that it is a "miracle" that Iraqis are now enjoying freedom, but said nothing about how such freedom was achieved. Haitham said Hakim, speaking in Arabic although he is fluent in Farsi after many years of exile in Iran, spoke of Iraq and Iran's historical friendship. Haitham asserted that the United States was not mentioned in any context, and that Hakim did not raise the issue of Iranian support for Iraqi militias or other destabilizing actors. At the press conference, Ahmadinejad replied to a question about Iran's support to militias by declaring that Iran itself is a victim of terrorism but that no purpose is served by alleging blame as to who might be responsible.

SHIA REACTION--PR BONANZA FOR AHMADINEJAD

¶5. (C) Anecdotal soundings among Shia contacts confirmed a general view that Ahmadinejad's visit was short on substance but long on media exposure and press conferences for the

camera-loving Iranian President. Sheikh Abdul Halim al-Zuhairi, Dawa Party executive council member and Prime Minister Maliki's spiritual advisor, stated that while any direct contact with leaders of Iraq's neighboring states is a good thing in and of itself, the Ahmadinejad visit struck him as a "protocol event" that will be significant only if Iran follows up on its MOU commitments. Shia Independent CoR member Qassim Daoud told us he had been invited to participate in Ahmadinejad's scheduled meeting with parliamentarian leaders, but Qassim opted to forego the opportunity because "the visit is only for Ahmadinejad's PR benefit and nothing serious will be discussed." Fadhila Party CoR member Kareem al-Yaqubi told us his party's bloc leader also elected not to attend Ahmadinejad's meeting with CoR leaders, and opined that the real purpose of the visit was to embarrass the United States.

COMMENT: IRAQ'S ARAB NEIGHBORS MUST RISE TO THE CHALLENGE

¶6. (C) Initial reaction varied predictably and the true impact of the visit will require time to evaluate. While more temperate than normal, Ahmadinejad could not resist rhetorically sparring with the United States--something everyone fully expected. The visuals, however, should be a potent reminder to Iraq's Arab neighbors that they have vested interests of their own in Iraq that may be in danger if they continue their current diplomatic inertia. The Embassy will use this trip to continue pressing key Arab neighbors, particularly the KSA, Kuwait and Egypt, to open embassies and send ambassadors to Baghdad.

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